DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 251 CE 050 663

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TITLE Paulo Freire and Adult Education: A Radical Model for Liberal Educators.
PUB DATE Sep 88
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Education; *Adult Educators; *Educational Attitudes; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Practices; *Liberalism
IDENTIFIERS *Freire (Paulo); Radicalism

ABSTRACT

Since the 1970 English publication of "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has been a compelling and controversial figure in adult education. Most often associated with the radical end of the philosophic continuum, Freire has nonetheless managed to gain acceptance among moderate adult educators who do not necessarily share his philosophic outlook. This phenomenon can be understood within the context of liberal and radical education, two orientations increasingly reflected in adult education literature, especially by P. Jarvis. In addition, some social developments of the last three decades have contributed to an acceptance of radical thought. In practice, Freire is largely liberal, stressing the phenomenal and existential nature of the individual; his private life has not been that of the radical revolutionary. It is possibly Freire's eclectic blend of Marxism, Christian humanism, and existentialism that appeals to adult educators, particularly adult educators within a Judeo-Christian context that teaches that all good things evolve from the power of the individual. However, since liberals ignore Freire's radical ideas and radicals ignore his liberal teachings, Freire's true contribution to adult education will be obscured until these issues are faced objectively. (KC)

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PAULO FREIRE AND ADULT EDUCATION:

A RADICAL MODEL FOR LIBERAL EDUCATORS

Abstract:

Since the 1970 English publication of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has been a compelling and controversial figure in adult education. Most often associated with the radical end of the philosophic continuum, Freire has nonetheless managed to gain acceptance among moderate adult educators who do not necessarily share his philosophic paradigm. This phenomenon is examined within the context of liberal and radical education, two orientations increasingly reflected in adult education literature (Jarvis: 1985).

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September, 1988

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PAULO FREIRE AND ADULT EDUCATION: A RADICAL MODEL FOR LIBERAL EDUCATORS

Few theorists have captured the imagination of adult educators as Paulo Freire has since the 1970 English translation of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This account of Freire's literacy programs in Brazil and statement of his philosophical and political dogma was quickly embraced by many in the adult education community. J. R. Kidd (1973) wrote:

> Freire is more than a critic or analyst;
> he has developed a pedagogy for adults,
> a pedagogy for free men.
>
> (157)

Youngman (1986) calls Freire a "highly significant figure in adult education," with a "cultish" following. Brookfield (1986) includes Freire in a list of highly regarded theorists and writes:

> Institutional, adragogical, self-directed,
> or Freirian approaches are probably used,
> at different times and in different degrees,
> in most (adult education) programs.
>
> (259)

What is it about Freire that appeals to adult educators? Why has he remained a compelling and controversial figure long after the diffusion of New Left

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ideology of the 60s and 70s? The answers to these questions are as complex as the impact of Freire on adult education. One way to illuminate this phenomenon is by examining the radical and liberal elements of Freire's theory within the context of modern adult education.

Liberal and Radical Education Philosophy

Jarvis (1985) notes that adult education literature increasingly reflects two explicit types of philosophy: liberal and radical. Liberal education owes much to the psycho-social humanism of Maslow and Rogers, but its genesis lies with the romantic tradition of Rousseau (Giroux: 1983). Radical education philosophy, on the other hand, most often generates from Marxism. Its relative importance today stems largely from the globalism of the 80s, when so-called Third World countries impact upon the developed world in ways never before experienced. In addition, some social developments of the last three decades have contributed to an acceptance of radical thought; among them:

* A growth of Catholic radicalism following the 1965 Second Vatican Council;
* The rise of the "New Left" in Europe and North America in the late 60s, characterized by
* Support for anti-imperialism, the ascendence of movements for blacks, woman, and students;

* The revitalization of Marxist intellectual tradition.

(Youngman: 151)

Radical and liberal theories share some similarities, such as a concern with alienation. Both reject education as a medium for tracking people into oppressive social roles and accept the power of education to prevent this type of manipulation. Theoretically, Freire is radical, romanticizing Marxist revolutionaries and calling in socialist parlance for change in oppressive social structures. In adult education literature, he is most often associated with the radical end of the philosophic continuum. In practice, however, Freire is largely liberal, stressing the phenomenal and existential nature of the individual, and his private life has not modeled the fanatic, athiest many associate with radical revolutionaries. It is possibly Freire's eclectic blend of Marxism, Christian humanism, and existentialism which appeals to adult educators, particularly adult educators within a Judeo-Christian context which teaches that all good things evolve from the power of the individual.

There is nothing in Freire's pedagogical model to offend adult educators. It is group centered dialogic learning; curriculum derives from the participants; there are no teachers, but rather group facilitators. Adult educators feel at home with Freirian pedagogy which seems to reflect the best andragogical principles. They view Freire

as a theorist who has gone beyond the moribund rhetoric of his radical peers to education practice which is at least effective in the Third World and which may be relevant for developed countries as well. Freirian inspired education is not unusual among adult basic education and community development in the United States. Brookfield (1986) cites three such initiatives: The Liberacion Learning Center in South Florida, the Instituto del Progreso Latino in Chicago, and Project Literacy in San Francisco (169). Youngman (1986) writes:

> ...liberal ideology of mainstream adult education is able to absorb Freire in a number of ways... .
>
> (152)

Some writers note concern for the ways in which Freire has been denuded, domesticated, absorbed, nullified (Mackie: 1980) and pre-empted (Fecunda: 1984), particularly in the United States. Facile acceptance of Freire's theory and pedagogy sabotages critical examination of the differences between radical and liberal philosophies.

Liberal Versus Radical Theories

1. Liberals presume a measure of individual autonomy; radicals deny that people are free to mediate their lives (Shor: 1986).

2. Liberals assume rationality; radicals label rationality an ideological concept (Jarvis: 1985, Miller: 1977).

3. Liberalism (philosophical idealism) questions the independent existence of external reality, suggesting that reality is dependent upon minds and ideas; radicals rely on Marxist materialism which regards reality as having an independent existence (Youngman: 1986).

4. Liberals accept, to some degree, the status quo and the role of education in sustaining it (Giroux: 1983); radicals reject the status quo and call for revolutionary change in social institutions (Freire: 1970, Illich: 1970, Shor: 1986, Youngman: 1986).

5. Liberals regard values as inherent in the organism; Marxists stress values as reflection of class interests (Youngman: 1986).

6. Liberalism glorifies innate intelligence and reason; radicals view intelligence as a product of education and social forces (Youngman: 1986).

By adapting and adopting, in very American fashion, those parts of Freire's tenets which appeal and rejecting those parts which do not, adult educators illuminate an interesting phenomenon. Freire can be interpreted in several ways. For all of his radical rhetoric, Freire is not entirely radical. His theories have been related to those of early Marx (Fecunda: 1984, Mathews: 1980) and clearly he identifies with and is identified by revolutionaries around the world, but despite Freire's incendiary prose, his pedagogy is not much different from some liberal adult education in the United States. His approach was radical in Recife in the 60s and would probably be viewed as threatening in a number of oppressive countries of the world today. However, for a radical, Freire exhibits some remarkably moderate ideas.

> Freire clearly believes that the individual has some control over his/her destiny. His literacy programs were designed to nurture this capacity.
>
> Although Freire refuses to condemn violence as a revolutionary tactic, he does not call for violent overthrow of any government. Rather, he seems to believe that it is somehow possible to work within the system to bring about change. His work has received support from such

established organizations as the Agency for International Development, Harvard, the University of Recife, and the World Council of Churches.

Freire's education objective is consonant with but much less defined than a socialist agenda. Socialist education seeks to engage the learner in clearly defined class struggles. Freire addresses class struggle in a highly abstract fashion, implying that if learners become literate and develop critical consciousness, class struggles will take care of themselves.

Freire (1970) writes: " The world which brings consciousness into existence becomes the world of that consciousness (70)." The individual's phenomenal world is the nucleus of Freirian pedagogy, not the independent reality of Marxist materialism.

In many ways, Freire reflects socialist dogma. Praxis, critical to Freirian pedagogy, is a Marxist notion. Also, assisting people to clarify contradictions and possibilities in their lives, a theme in Freire's writing, probably derives from Marx' 1845 Theses on Feuerbach. Freire's socialist orientation attracts radical adult educators, but

is not too dominant for liberal educators attracted to the humanist elements of Freirian thought. Freire's well documented lack of communicative clarity does nothing to inhibit truncated interpretation of his writing. Since, as Jarvis points out, adult educators tend to fall on the liberal-radical end of the education continuum, there is something in Freire's theory and practice to appeal to the majority of adult educators.

Conclusions

Adult educators accept Paulo Freire's theory and pedagogy because they are viewed as compatible, or at least not incompatible, with adult education principles. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) point out:

> To the extent that radical social change is not equated with political revolution, the views of Freire and other radical theorists may well receive increasing attention from adult educators... .
>
> (64)

Adult educators are not strangers to radical social change. They tend to perceive themselves as change agents, a point of view which seldom finds a forum in traditional education. Freire vindicates adult educators who want to believe that education practiced for the right reasons can succeed. There is some evidence, however, that members of the adult

education community have embraced Freire without politically informed analysis of his contribution. Liberals pick out the humanist tenets in Freire's theory and ignore the radical. Radicals select the socialist elements of Freire's paradigm and pretend that he is the exemplar of radical adult education. Neither group is entirely correct or entirely incorrect, a situation which makes it difficult to examine the inconsistencies in Freire's approach.

- Freire is identified as a radical educator when, in fact, he is a liberal educator with radical sympathy or a radical educator with liberal tendencies. The issue is that liberal and radical education are essentially different.

- It is assumed that successful practice makes Freire more than just a man of high philosophical abstraction. In other words, practice validates theory. In fact, Freire's literacy programs in South America have never been evaluated. There is no empirical reason to believe they were successful. They may have been, but there is at least an equal chance they were not.

- Freire rails against oppressive ruling elites but, in fact, his own career has been sponsored by favored elements of several societies.

Freire's true contribution to adult education will be obscured until these issues are faced objectively.

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